

*The Building, Beautifying, or
Repairing of Churches,
an Act of Religion.*

A

SERMON

Preached in the Parish Church of

St. HELENS, London,

On Sunday, August 3. 1697.

At the first opening of that Church
after it had been Repair'd.

By *Tho. Willis, M.A. Vicar of St. Helens.*

L O N D O N,

Printed for *John Southby, at the Harrow in
Cornhil. MDC XCVII.*



To my Worthy and
Loving Friends, the Parish-
ioners of *St. Helens*.

Gentlemen,

I Heartily bless Almighty God for
that Station, which, by his Provi-
dence, I have amongst you, where I
have no need to rack my Invention to
study Arguments of Perswasion, but ra-
ther proper terms of Praise: you gene-
rally doing of your duty, without giving
me time or opportunity as your Minister,
to recommend it to you.

This last Act of yours which occasion-
ed this ensuing discourse, which is now
humbly presented to you, will, I doubt
not, make you famous and eminent for
your Piety and Zeal, throughout this
great and populous City.

That

Epistle Dedicatory.

That such a small number of Persons (as you are) should repair such an old, large, decay'd Church, at your own proper cost and charges, without assistance from the Publick, must needs redound much unto your honour in the Eyes of your fellow-Citizens.

God Almighty grant, that this, and all your other Works of Charity and Religion, (which are many) may be rewarded an hundred fold in this World, and in the World to come with Eternal Life.

This is, and shall be, the daily and hearty Prayer of

Gentlemen,

Your unworthy,

But most Faithful Minister,
and Servant,

Tho. Willis.

1 Chron. XXII 5.

*The house that is to be builded
for the Lord must be exceed-
ing Magnifical, of Fame and
of Glory throughout all Coun-
tries.*

R Eason is the distinctive Cha-
racter of Man, and Religion
is his Crown and Glory. Religion
(which is the Holy Worship of God)
is the great end of man's Life and
Being in the world. By Religion it
is, that man gives to God that Glo-
ry and Honour which is due to his
great Name. Now God is a Being infi-
nite in all Excellencies and Perfections;
and by a hearty acknowledgment of
his infinite Excellencies, man gives
B Honour

Honour to God. But then this acknowledgment must be manifested by agreeable Actions. God hath given man a body and a soul, and he ought to be, and will be honour'd by both. Man rightly honours God by an internal estimation of his excellencies, demonstrated by his external Actions. And amongst these actions sure not any more tends to the divine honour, than the having of a house erected to the Lord, especially such a house, as by its amplitude, splendor, and beauty, may be a visible demonstration of a very high esteem of God; and such was the design of holy *David*, here mentioned in my Text, for the house to be built by his Son *Solomon*. *The house that is to be builded, &c.*

Here in these words we have;

1. Mention made of a house to be built for the Lord, *i. e.* for the name, the honour and service of the most high God.

adly,

2dly, We have an account given us of the excellency and pre-eminence of this house above other Houses. *The house that is builded for the Lord must be exceeding magnificent*; i. e. it must be magnificent to the height: and then lastly

3dly, We have the reason or end of this Magnificence assigned; it must be for a name, renown, and glory throughout all Lands, throughout the whole habitable World. That thereby the name of God, and the fame of his excellent Greatness might be extended to the ends of the Earth.

The greatest works of men should be designed to the highest honour of God. Man cannot exceed in magnificence, in those things that tend to the honour of the Divine Majesty. Man should not satisfy himself in bringing a small tribute of praise to his Maker: But he should endeavour to lift up his glory to the Hea-

vens, and to extend his honour to the ends of the Earth.

But the one thing, which, upon this our first meeting in this place, after the great cost you have been at, for the repairing, beautifying and adorning this house, (which is set apart for the honour of God Almighty's Name) I shall now endeavour in a short discourse to demonstrate in this, that it is a proper act of natural and rational Religion to have a house, a stately and magnificent house, to the honour and glory of God, which will lead me in the close of my discourse, to take notice of, and commend your piety and zeal, which has rendered this place, we now once more are assembled in, such a one.

Religion is the holy Worship of God. *God is a Spirit, and* (as our blessed Saviour told the woman of Joh. 4. 23. *Samaria*) *is to be worshipped in spirit and in truth.* And this worship is
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acceptable to him, as well in a Clay Cottage, as in a Marble Palace. Three Wise men or Kings, (as some will have them) we read worshipp'd Matt. 2. Christ in a Stable; and sure it was no less acceptable than if they had done it in a Glittering Court. Nay, give me leave to say, that it was a higher Act of Religion in them to adore Christ in a Stable, lying in a Manger, than it would have been to have done so, had they found him in a Royal Palace, sitting in Princely State upon a Throne of Gold. Though when these Princely Sages of the East came to him, there was no appearance of any humane Greatness in him; yea, notwithstanding the extraordinary meanness of his Condition, they acknowledg'd his Royalty and Divinity with humble Homage and Adoration: They Address to him as a King, they Worship him as a God.

But

But yet after all, I must say, that though this Spiritual Worship be acceptable to God in every Place, as being indeed the very Soul of Religion; it must not be without a Body. I mean it must demonstrate itself (when occasion is offered) by some visible Acts to the Honour of God: and so it is an eminent Act of Religion, to have a Stately and Magnificent House to the glory of his Name.

God we all know is an Invisibile Power, an Immense Being. *The most High dwelleth not in Temples made with hands, (as saith the Prophet) Heaven is my Throne, and Earth my Footstool; what House will ye build me, saith the Lord? or what is the place of my Rest? Hath not my Hand made all these things?* Yet to this the Apostle premises, *Solomon built him a House, as you find Acts 7. from verse 47th to the 50th.* And our Blessed Saviour sufficiently vindicated the Ho-

Honour of his Fathers House, by scourging the Buyers and Sellers out of the Courts of the Temple, *Matt.* 21. 12, 13.

To have a Stately, Beautiful, and well adorned House to the Honour of God, for a Renown and Glory amongst men, is a proper Act of Religion: an Act of Religion, I say, not of Jewish, Paganish, or Popish Superstition; but of Natural, Rational and Real Religion. Which is no less proper and agreeable to Christians under the Gospel, than to holy and good men under the Law.

This I shall endeavour to clear and prove, 1. By the Nature and Reason of the thing; 2dly, By its agreeableness to the Nature and Reason of man; and 3dly, By the Approbation and Acceptance of God.

First, then, I say, to have a Stately, Beautiful, and well adorned House (or Church, call it which you will) to the Honour of God,
for

for a Renown and Glory amongst men, appears to be a proper Act of Religion, by the Nature and Reason of the thing. What is Religion, but the right Worship of the only true God? It is a giving him the Honour due to his great name, by an acknowledgment of his infinite Excellencies. And this acknowledgment must be open and visible (as it were) to the Eyes of the World, by some eternal Testimonies and Actions. Thus in *Levit. 10. 3.* we read that the Lord spake, saying, *I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me, and before all the people I will be glorified.* Now this must either be done by words, as in Prayers or Praises; or by some certain actions and gestures.

And indeed by the self-same Actions by which we pay our Respects, and give Honour to men, we must testify our acknowledgments of the Divine Excellencies to the Honour
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of God, as particularly by uncovering the Head, and bowing the Knee.

Now how can a Subject be supposed more to honour his Prince and Sovereign, than by erecting a magnificent Pallace, or repairing and beautifying a decayed stately structure to his Honour? And thus may a man honour the great King of Kings, whose Subject he is, the most high God I mean, by either building, beautifying, or repairing a Temple, or Pallace, (as *David* calls it, 1 *Cron.* 29. 1. when he says, *the Pallace is not for man but for the Lord God*) to the Glory and Honour of his great Name. By such acts as these a man makes a visible, and practical acknowledgment of the Majesty, Greatness, and Royal dignity of God. He that acknowledges the divine Excellencies in words, (such as Praises are) truly honours God, according to that of the Psalmist,

Psal. 50. 23. Whoso offereth praise, glorifieth me; but he that doth such Works as these, by doing so may be said to honour God, much more than the other, who only chants forth his Praises.

A stately, and well adorned Palace is for the honour of the King: and a beautiful Temple, as that of *Solomons* formerly was, is for the honour of Almighty God. Praises we know are but cheap acknowledgments; but he that repairs an old decay'd Temple to God, (such as we all know this lately was) cannot be said to honour him with that which costs him nothing. The Pious man by his Praises acknowledges God to be a good God; but he that does this latter, acknowledges him to be a great King.

And thus I have shewed you how to have a stately, magnificent, and well adorned House, wherein to serve God, and to attend upon all the ordinances of his Worship, is an act of

natural, rational, and real Religion ; from the nature and reason of the thing, I proceed now then to prove it to be so.

2dly, By its agreeableness to the Nature and Reason of man. Now this plainly appears in that, in all Nations of the World, they who have apprehended an adorable Divinity, have built a magnificent Temple to the honour of the God or Goddess whom they have adored ; and from time to time have adorned and beautified such Temples, thus built with the choicest and richest of their Treasures.

Such was the Temple of *Jupiter* in *Cizicus*. a certain City of *Mysia*, the Pillars of which were four Cubits thick, and in height fifty : The whole was of polished stone, and each stone was joined to the other with no meaner a cement than a line of Gold. But that which Queen *Semiramis* erected to the same supposed God in *Babylon*,

was far more sumptuous and costly, and richly beautified and adorned with Gold and Silver. The Temple of *Diana* was twenty years in building, and above one hundred and fifty in adorning. The Temple of *Peace* in *Rome* was built by *Vespasian*. three hundred Foot in length, and in breadth two hundred; and all the rarieties of the golden House of *Nero*, were bestowed as Ornaments for this Temple.

Now, though these Persons, who built such stately Fabricks, and so richly adorned them to the honour of their supposed Divinities, grossly erred in the object of their Worship; yet by this it is apparent that it is agreeable to the dictate of Nature, and consonant to the reason of Man, to have a Magnificent and Beautiful House or Temple to the Divinity we adore, as an expression of that Honour which is due from us to God.

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It is not consistent with the high and honourable thoughts which men ought to have of God to be content to attend the solemnities of his Holy Service, in a mean and sordid House. He is not worthy of the honourable Title of God Almighty's Servant, who hath less regard to that House which is dedicated to his Service and Honour, than he hath to that of his own Dwelling and Abode; and can willingly lay out his Wealth for the furnishing and adorning the latter, and be well satisfied, though the former lies in a desolate and ruinous condition.

The Nature of Man cannot in the most corrupted state but be so ingenuous, as to dictate this Truth; that that Being, who gives the best, most certainly does deserve the best. So that if God gives the best Blessings to us, he deserves the best returns from us. What matter is it if we offer our earthly Treasures to him

him, from whom we expect Grace here, and everlasting Glory when we go hence ?

It is true, God is not taken with any shining or beautiful Adornments as men are ; but yet it is very meet and fitting that by such things as these we should testify our high esteem of him, and great Love to him. That man who hath a due apprehension of the Greatness and Majesty of God, and of his mercy and goodness to man, will think no cost too great, or Ornament at any time too rich, for that House which is set apart for the Honour of his Name.

That this is not a strange or forced Conception, but the natural thought and sentiment of Mankind, is further apparent, in that the famous Temple of *Solomon* formerly was built, according to the dictates of Natural Reason in King *David*, for it was in the mind of that Pious Prince to do this,

this, before the will of God concerning it was declared and made known. For it is said *1 Kings 8. 17.* that it was *in the heart of David to build a House for the name of the Lord God of Israel.* And yet if you turn to *2 Sam. 7. 7.* You find that *in time past God never had spoke a word to any of the Tribes of Israel, saying, why build ye me not a House of Cedar?*

So that the first contrivance of this was, the natural product of that holy man's own Breast, which renders the Action agreeable to a man's natural reason and understanding. And seeing this was no act of Ceremonial Service, it is equally agreeable to the times of the Gospel. And after the Abolition of Legal Sacrifices, the Apostles made use of the Temple thus built for evangelical services; for as we read, *Acts 2. 46.* *They continued daily with one accord in the Temple.*

But

But as thus to erect or beautify a House to the Honour of God, wherein to perform the offices and services of Religious Worship, appears to be agreeable to the nature and reason of man, so

3. 3dly, It may be evidenced to be a proper act of Religion, by the approbation and acceptance of God. Thus we read in 1 *Kings* 8. 18. that the Lord said unto *Dauid*, *Whereas it was in thy Heart to build a House unto my Name, thou didst well that it was in thine heart*; and if you peruse the 2 *Sam* 7. *throughout*; you will find God by his Prophet *Nathan*, approving of *David's* Religious purpose, and promising great Benefits and Blessings to his seed upon that account. And it is very memorable what *Josephus* writes, that during the time of the building of this Temple, (or the repairing it rather and eight years in doing) it never rained by day, but by night only, so that the

the Workmen were not lett or hindered. God who commands the Clouds, by thus ordering and disposing of the showers of Heaven, approving of the re-edifying of his House on Earth

The Temple I grant indeed was typical of Christ, and Prayers were directed towards it, and sacrifices to be offered only at it. But the building of it, I say, was a proper act of Natural Religion, for it was as (worded in my Text) for the honour of the most high God.

I know *Origen* says, the Christians have no Temples, and *Arnobius*, we, *i. e.* Christians, do not Honour God by building of Temples to him, but yet I find the word Temple was used by some Christians in early days, for *Iugertius* tells the *Magnesiums*, 'All of you meet together in one place, and go as one man to the Temple of God. It is true, that the generality of the Primitive Christians did shun

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the name of Temple, partly in respect of the typical use of the Temple of *Solomon*, to which the moral service was directed, and much of the Ceremonial was confined. And this upon the Account of the שכינה or divine Presence. But now God who is every where graciously present in his Church, is every where acceptably worshipp'd.

Again, the primitive Christians generally shunn'd the name of the Temple, partly too in opposition to the Temples of the Heathens, in which they shut up and worshipp'd their Divinities ; whereas the Christians acknowledged Gods immensity, and declared Heaven it self could not contain him : According to that of *Acts* 7. 48, 49. *The most high dwelleth not in Temples made with hands, for Heaven is his throne, and earth is his foot-stool.*

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But though for these reasons the Name of Temple was by the primitive Christians generally avoided and shunned, they yet call'd their places for publick Worship *ἐκκλησίαις* Churches, and the more stately structures that were erected for the honour of God and the Christian Religion, *βασιλικαῖς* Royal Palaces, acknowledging by doing so, Gods Sovereign Majesty and Supreme Authority, as King of the Church, which to do I hope you will allow to be a proper Act of Natural and Rational Religion, and both these they call'd *οἶκος θεοῦ*, Houses of God, as being dedicated to his immediate service and honour.

The House of *John*, Surnamed *Mark*, being the place of our Saviour's eating the last Passover, and instituting his Holy Supper, the place where the Disciples afterward assembled, and Christ came to them, and where the Holy Ghost descended;

Grot. in
Acts 7.48.

this House, I say, was afterwards made a fair Fabrick, and a famous Church, as *St. Hierom*, and venerable *Bede*, both tells us.

Under the Emperor *Severus* the Christians began to build Churches to God, but when *Dioclesian* came he beat them down, thinking at one and the same time to demolish Churches, and to destroy the Christian Religion. *Maximinus* when he ascended the Throne gave leave that the demolish'd Churches might be rebuilt. Upon this the Christians presently were overjoy'd, and quickly rais'd them to an incredible Height, and an incomparable Beauty.

Taylor's
Life of
Christ. p.
242.

Lucian calls the Christian Church χρυσόρονον οἶκος, the Golden-roofed House. This we must say was more for Ornament than Service: for the honour of God, rather than the necessary use of Men.

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The Temple, and every *Basilica*, or stately Christian Church is, properly speaking, a Type of that Heaven where the Holy Angels incessantly attend the most high God in Glory; for herein is God adored, so far as mans meanness can attain, in a way agreeable to his Greatness and Majesty. Thus St. *Chrysostom* chiding his people of *Antioch*, for walking and talking in the Church, says, the Church of God is not a Shop of Merchandize, but the place of Angels and Arch-Angels, the Court of God, and an Image of Heaven; and St. *Gregory* calls the Church *ecclesia*, *templum*, Heaven on Earth.

And thus have I endeavour'd, according to my promise, to clear it to you, that it is a proper act of Natural and Rational Religion to have a House, a stately, magnificent, and well adorned House, or Church, to the Honour and Glory of God. And now, my Brethren, instead of
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recommending your Duty to your Practice, in the close of my discourse. I cannot but applaud you for having done it.

How can I choose but commend your Piety and Zeal for the Honour of the Lord our God, evidenced in the Reparation of this (lately ruinous) House, wherein we now are? and the Reduction of it (at your great cost and charge) to a due decency and fitness for the use for which it is appointed, I mean the solemn Worship and Service of Almighty God? This is a work I believe you are all satisfied was necessary to be done, and now it is done, I must tell you is honourable and acceptable to God.



The solemnity of Gods Service, and the Publick exercise of Religion, is certainly the most necessary and honourable Work in the whole World. It is so esteemed by all Nations, as well Heathens, who wor-

worship false Gods, as Christians that adore the true.

The solemn acts of Religion are designed to a twofold end, which renders the publick Worship of God, of such mighty concern to all men, and so very necessary, that nothing in the world can be more so, or of greater concern to any man. Now these are the Honour and Glory of God, and the Salvation of the Souls of men. This is the great end of mans Life and Being, and better indeed a man had never seen the Light or had a Being in the World, than that neglecting the means of the Salvation of his Soul, he should dye in his Sins, and lye in the tormenting Flames below for ever.

Now there is so necessary a connection of these two, that the one cannot possibly be separated from the other. No man that does not give to God the Glory that is due to his Name

Name in the Duties of his Holy worship, can secure the Salvation of his own Soul: For Gods glory is the great end of Mans Salvation, and therefore that man that gives not Glory to God, must himself expect no interest in his saving Mercy. God should seem accessary to his own dishonour (which is not imaginable) if he should bring that man to a State of Honour and Happiness in Heaven, who refuses to give to him the Glory due to his Name, whilst he is here on Earth.

But now, that man that gives glory to God, by an humble attendance on the Ordinance of his solemn Worship and Service, uses the most proper means to secure the Salvation of his Soul; and if his Life carry not a contradiction to his Religion, he shall certainly be saved. For he that gives honour to God in the duties of his Worship, and gives not a lye to himself in his Life and Conversation, is
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in the right and direct way to Heaven and Everlasting Happiness.

Now if it be thus necessary to give Glory to God, and to take care of the Salvation of our Souls, by a due and reverent attendance upon God in Duties of his publick and solemn Worship and Service, then it must needs be necessary that there be some place where we may conveniently meet for this end and purpose.

Now this is the place appointed for this purpose; this is the House built for this end; but how unfit not long since it was for the Holy Worship of Almighty God, your selves well know. But now, (to your honour and praise be it spoken) it is reduced to a due decency for so sacred and solemn a Service, for so Divine and Glorious a Presence as that of God is.

This is done like your selves, who I will say always appeared persons of brave and generous Spirits, whenever

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the Cause of God or Religion gave you an opportunity of shewing yourselves. By this act of yours you have shew'd your fellow-Citizens how high a Regard you have for that great Majesty, that glorious God, whom we adore.

This is a Work which tends to the glory of God, the honour of Religion, and the special Renown of this Parish. But then, my honoured and well beloved Brethren, let me, as your Minister, make one humble Request to you, which is this : that you would let this great Work of Piety be accompany'd with the Actions of a good Life, and the exercise of the Graces of Christianity.

I would, indeed, have every Christian Church well adorned with beautiful Pictures. Be not amazed, for the Pictures I mean are Pious Christians, the lively Pictures of God and Christ on Earth. Nothing can be more unagreeable than the Picture
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of the Devil in the Temple of God, and yet such I will say, is every wicked man ; an Abomination in the Holy Place whenever he appears there.

To conclude then, be we holy in Heart and Life , and we shall be companions of Angels, have Communion with God and Christ in his Holy Ordinances ; and hereafter be admitted into the Temple of Glory, there to celebrate the Praises of our God to Eternity.

To him be Glory, Might, Majesty, Dominion , and Praise, both now and ever, Amen

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